

The Policy and Standards  
of  
The National Board of Censorship  
of  
Motion Pictures



REVISED JANUARY 1915



The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures  
(A Voluntary, Cooperative Organization)  
Established by the People's Institute  
70 Fifth Avenue  
New York City

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# THE NATIONAL BOARD OF CENSORSHIP OF MOTION PICTURES

ESTABLISHED BY THE PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE  
70 FIFTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK CITY, N. Y.

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# The Policy and Standards of The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures

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# *The Standards of The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures*

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- Film censorship is a practical matter. The censors must have some kind of policy. This policy, while allowing them to be positive, must at the same time permit them to be experimental. It is necessary for such criticism to be consistent if the producers are to learn anything from the censors or accommodate their plans to the judgment of the censors. It is equally important to have well-defined principles if the public is to realize that there are limits beyond which producers of motion pictures must not go.

Film censorship, however, cannot be reduced to unchangeable rules. Even the principles often must be held tentatively until we know whether a given principle is really no more than a prejudice. Film censorship encounters all those problems which still are obscure at the present stage of our knowledge of social ethics, of the nature of emotional response, of suggestion and of psychological reaction.

At least, the worker on the National Board of Censorship may feel that he is doing what has perhaps never been attempted before in the world's history. A tremendous business and a new art, in its formative days, is calling on this disinterested body to interpret between it and public opinion.

- 2. The Functions of Motion Picture Censorship And Its Evils.**
- The function of motion picture censorship is to pass upon motion pictures prior to their being released to the general public, permitting only the issuance of the morally unobjectionable ones. Police censorship, however, is one of the chief attributes of autocratic and paternalistic governments. There is involved here a fundamental principle which must not be considered lightly. It is the principle of liberty of speech and liberty of creation. The curtailment of this liberty is a matter of grave social danger. The moving picture show represents expression of dramatic and of news events. In both of these, censorship is a delicate matter, and unless practiced with broad-mindedness and liberality is apt to do more harm than good. As soon as censorship passes beyond the realm of education and suggestive guidance, and becomes a matter of coercion, it is on dangerous ground. Society must, however, in some way, regulate motion pictures without permitting the establishment of a despotic form of legal censorship. The National Board of Censorship is an effort in that direction. Though it is a voluntary, extra-legal body, having no legal power resident in itself, its verdicts have the effect of legal decisions through the co-operation of Mayors, license bureaus, police departments and boards of public welfare in the cities throughout the country where the official correspondents enforce the judgments of the National Board.



### 3. The Relation Between the National Board and the Trade Interests

There is some misapprehension as to the relation of the National Board to the trade interests. Accordingly, a brief statement as to the history and organization of the Board is essential.

The National Board of Censorship was organized in March, 1909, by the People's Institute at the request of the Theatres exhibiting motion pictures in New York City. At the request of the manufacturers of motion picture films, the scope of the work became national in June 1909. Since that date, the Board has gained an increasing control over the films exhibited in America, until it now views over 95 per cent. of all films shown to the American public.

The Board has, since June, 1909, been administered by the People's Institute of New York, whose clerical machinery is utilized in part by the Board. The Board is self-governing in all particulars; establishes its own standards; elects its own officers and executive staff; and controls its own finances.

The personnel of the Board may be found on the inside of the front cover. The General Committee was called together by the People's Institute at the beginning of the Board's existence and elects its own members.

This committee, the governing body of the Board, is composed of representatives annually delegated by the organizations set beside their names, and of members at large, who, though they do not officially represent organizations, are prominently identified with various welfare movements. The Executive Committee is elected by the General Committee. The members of the Censoring Committee are formally elected to the Board by the General Committee for stated periods. These members are drawn from every group, such as professional people, social workers, and others interested in motion picture problems. No member of the Board is engaged in any branch of the motion picture business, and no member is salaried directly or indirectly for his services.

### 4. The National Board as a Means of Internal Trade Regulation.

One reason for the existence of the National Board is that it supplies a means of internal trade regulation. The audiences and the public hold all manufacturers responsible for the product of any one manufacturer. A single producer of obscene or demoralizing films will bring discredit upon all the exhibitors in a large city, and will injure the business of every manufacturer who produces for the American market. As a result of this fact, the motion picture has to rise or fall as a whole. The standing of every manufacturer is dependent to a certain extent upon the good intentions of every other manufacturer or importer.

This control cannot be exerted save through the submission by all business parties to some outside disinterested agency; the National Board of Censorship is simply this agency, to which they and their competitors submit for moral censorship, in order that the whole film business may not be injured through the recklessness of one or a few members of that business. The community of interest among motion picture manufacturers—even rival manufacturers—is thus a powerful aid to the Board in making its verdicts effective.



**5. The National Board as  
An Agent of Public Opinion.**

The principal reason, however, for the existence of the National Board is that it is the agent of public opinion in the moral regulation of photoplays. Public opinion is not represented by professional uplifters and reformers—the collection of moralists generally—but is represented by the thoughtful and intelligent attitude of the great mass of mankind which is not greatly afflicted with “isms” of any sort. The members of the National Board accordingly give their thoughtful attention to the pictures and try to reflect what the people of the United States would think about any given picture were they sitting *en masse* to view it.

**6. The Procedure of The  
National Board of Censorship.**

The Censoring Committee, which views all pictures submitted to the Board, is divided into a number of sub-divisions, each one of which gives one morning or one afternoon a week to the work. A majority of those voting determines the action of the Board on any picture. An appeal from the verdict of the Censoring Committee may be taken by any dissatisfied member of the Committee, by the Secretary, or by the owner of the film in question. The General Committee has the power of final review. As soon as final action is taken, the owner of the film is notified in writing, and the notification is sent through the weekly Bulletin to correspondents of the Board.

In following up its verdicts to see that they are faithfully executed, the Board uses a number of methods.

1. The Board carries on local inspection in the New York Theatres. As it is usual for the Board's recommendations to be carried out in the original negative from which all copies are made, a change which appears in a film seen in New York likewise appears in all other copies.

2. The motion picture trade papers contain very complete advance information about all films designed for regular releases. Films are sold through advertisements printed in these papers. In addition, special or so-called States Rights films are usually sold through such advertisements. In this way the Board is able to check up the films inspected and to detect films which may not have been submitted to it for inspection.

3. The Board co-operates with local committees. The numerous correspondents of the Board, who receive its weekly Bulletin, are expected to inspect films shown in their city and at least to make a special search in order to ascertain whether any condemned film is shown and whether all changes recommended by the Board are carried out in the films shipped to their locality.

4. The National Board also receives regular reports from several social organizations, boards of public welfare, and police departments, who make it their business to inspect films listed as bearing eliminations on the weekly Bulletin issued by the Board. These organizations report to the National Board whether the changes requested in pictures have been faithfully carried out. When unfavorable reports are received, the matter is at once taken up with the manufacturer and an adjustment effected.

If the Board learns that any manufacturer has made a film public without submitting it to the Board, or that he has failed to carry out the



requests of the Board regarding alterations, this fact, unless promptly rectified, results in a complete severance of relations between the owner of this film and the Board. In other words, the Board reviews in advance either all a manufacturer's product or none of it, and continues this advance inspection only so long as the manufacturer uniformly carries out the Board's recommendations. Of course, even where films are not reviewed in advance, the Board makes every effort to see them after they begin to be publicly exhibited, and notifies its correspondents if it detects anything objectionable.

If an objectionable film is made public the Board promptly notifies the film exchanges which might purchase this picture and the civic bodies and police agents whose duty it is to suppress it. This necessity does not arise frequently, and in every case such action by the Board has resulted in a return of large quantities of film to the manufacturer and in a serious loss of money to him. Instances of this kind are increasingly rare.

**7. Consultations Between The National Board and Specialists in Social Problems.**

In order to obtain as representative an opinion as possible, it has been the policy of the National Board on special occasions to call to its assistance the advice of men and women who are specialists in social problems. In this way, the Board has had the benefit of the judgment of representatives of as many as a dozen social agencies of national repute in passing on films which presented unusual problems and called for the formation of new policies. The National Board has been fortunate in obtaining the co-operation of many institutions leading in public thought when pictures offering peculiar problems have been presented to it. It was after such conferences that the National Board formulated its policy on the White Slave and Drug Films set forth in sections elsewhere stated in these standards.

**8. What the National Board Cannot Do.**

It is necessary to preface a statement of what the Board does by what it does not do and cannot do.

(1) The Board cannot censor for any particular audience. It cannot require that the films approved by adults shall be shown only to adults. It cannot select the programs which are to be shown to children. Trade conditions are such that at present every film goes to the whole American audience, men and women, young and old.

It *can* and *does* urge the establishment of children's theatres and the presentation of special children's programs.

(2) The Board does not enforce on motion pictures simply its own views of what is desirable or right. The Board tries to eliminate its own personal equation completely. It tries to judge as to the real effect of each film on the composite audience which will witness it.

(3) The Board does not regard itself as a censor of taste, unless it is clear that the question of taste is an essentially moral question.

(4) The Board does not regard itself as a censor of accuracy, unless the accuracy in question is of a libellous kind, or will result in some concrete disaster to the person whom the inaccuracy misleads.



(5) The Board does not censor motion pictures from the standpoint of protecting the exhibitor or manufacturer from the consequences of producing a film which may alienate some powerful element in the community.

(6) The Board cannot judge films exclusively from the standpoint of children, or delicate women, or the emotionally morbid or neurasthenic, or of any one class of audience. But the Board does take into consideration, as one of the controlling motives governing it, the fact that possibly fifteen per cent. of a total motion picture audience is made up of children under sixteen. It also recognizes that adolescents who attend picture shows are peculiarly open to suggestion.

(7) The Board is not responsible for posters, handbills, or other advertising which may be given out concerning motion pictures. These are often sensational, sometimes misleading, and need to be controlled by local authorities all over the country; but it is impossible for the National Board to be responsible for them.

(8) The Board does not, in judging films, allow itself to be influenced by the moral character of persons who may be concerned in the production or acting of the films. But the Board does retain the right to forbid the exploitation of unworthy reputations, such as morbid presentation of persons who may have been associated with famous criminal cases.

**9. The Difficulty of Maintaining Absolute Consistency.** It is obvious that no matter how carefully a set of standards be drawn up, and how conscientious the censors be in interpreting public opinion, absolute consistency will not be attained; for the personal equation will always creep into the decisions. Different temperaments will react differently, and it is futile to seek a machine-like unanimity of opinion even though all be agreed on general principles and standards.

The principle the censors should bear in mind is that in case of reasonable doubt, they should give the picture the benefit of the doubt. Unless a picture be questionable, it should be passed rather than have the National Board restrict freedom of expression. Sometimes eliminations, additions, or changes of sub-titles will improve it.

Certain methods are employed, however, to keep the judgment of the different committees as nearly uniform as may be. For example:

1. Discussions are often held among the members of the Censoring Committee on the standards of judgment for particular pictures and classes of subjects as defined by previous decisions of the Board.

2. The members of the Censoring Committees are often invited to meetings of the General Committee when pictures dealing with new or involved questions are discussed.

3. All members have been provided with these standards, with which they are expected to be absolutely familiar.

Though unanimity of opinion is not attained, it is believed that the final action on pictures is consistent with the standards of the Board. The Board, however, frankly acknowledges that in reviewing nearly two hundred thousand feet of film a week, it must inevitably commit some errors in judgment.



4. Three secretaries spend their entire time at the various committee meetings. They see the pictures and hear all discussions and are consulted when a picture is being discussed. This makes for consistent action.

**10. The Difficulty of Censoring For All the People.**

The fact that the same picture goes to all audiences gives rise to some of the greatest problems of the National Board. These audiences are composed of a conglomeration of people ranging from three to eighty years of age, and representing social traditions and educational influences, some modern and some antiquated, some native and some foreign. Because of the present organization of the motion picture business, however, the Board has to pass moral judgment upon pictures destined for just such a diversified public.

**11. Motion Pictures, Children and Censorship.**

In censoring pictures, the National Board bears in mind the whole motion picture audience, and not simply the children, the morbid or the neurotic. It is sometimes alleged by certain people that a board of censorship should see to it that all pictures are made suitable for children to see. While it is true that possibly fifteen per cent. of the patrons of motion pictures are children under sixteen years of age, still it would be a calamity to reduce all pictures to the plane of the intelligence of the child. This is not the policy of the National Board. The motion picture is a new art and requires freedom from artificially hampering restrictions to achieve its possibilities. Many themes are suitable for adults and are a legitimate field for the motion picture art which are not entirely adapted for children. As a rule, such subjects are usually incomprehensible to the child and hence have no particular effect upon him. The solution of proper pictures for children probably will be found in having separate theatres for children and then in presenting carefully selected children's programmes.

**12. Censorship and the Adolescent.**

The National Board believes that it cannot take the same position in criticising pictures for the adolescent as for the child in the ages up to the teens. While it is true that in the adolescent from twelve to seventeen, the imagination acts quickly on the senses, still it is also true that the mind of the boy or girl generally preserves, in at least recognizable forms, the ideals of youth which act in varying degrees as a check against evil thoughts and evil doing.

By keeping obscenity and unnecessary suggestion out of motion pictures, the National Board believes that the harm that the motion picture can do to the boy or girl in this susceptible period is minimized or done away with. The Board is confident that the average boy or girl in the motion picture house can distinguish in the main good from evil when these appear on the screen and, if youth is to learn to look rightly upon the questionable matters of life, it should have the opportunity of distinguishing for itself what is questionable and what is not.

It is essential in all pictures in which questionable scenes occur that the main argument and effect of the picture shall be for good. To this end the censor should see to it that the evil characters in the picture come to harm as a direct result of their evil doings and that the net effect of the picture be convincingly in favor of good.



The National Board recognizes the vast increase of knowledge in the study of adolescence during the last few years. It is, therefore, seeking the judgment of those in the United States most skilled in adolescent psychology for a definition of the influence of the motion picture on members of this period of storm and stress.

**13. Standards are Progressive, Not Fixed.**

The National Board has established standards, but it insists that these are progressive, and not fixed. Change and progress will certainly occur constantly as the Board learns from experience more of what the reaction of the public is on various films. Nothing that is stated in this paper should be construed as being the final word of the National Board concerning censorship.

**14. The Censorship of The National Board is Constructive.**

Experience has taught that the best possibility of the work of censorship can be attained only when combined with a constructive policy. Censorship in itself alone is essentially destructive and coercive. The Board has often regarded the use of this word as unfortunate. For this reason, the National Board uses its influence with manufacturers and importers of films to produce only such films as in some way have real social value. By offering suggestions to the manufacturers, the National Board has been able to inspire a steady improvement in the character of the films produced. The manufacturers welcome this help from an impartial board of independent people. This work naturally progresses slowly, but it represents substantial and effective education at the point of production. In addition to making these comments and suggestions to the manufacturers, the National Board tries to follow a constructive policy by bearing in mind the purpose of the producer and the integrity of the art creation. Frequently, the National Board, in making eliminations, adds something of material value to the art of the picture. The Board expects the members of the committees to have well-considered reasons for requesting each proposed elimination.

**15. The Relation of Motion Picture Censorship to Newspapers, Books and Plays.**

The Board attempts to keep motion pictures attuned to public opinion, and not necessarily in harmony with productions of the stage or newspaper. The fact that the appeal of the motion picture is more vivid than that of print materially alters the question of how much should be shown to the public. For instance, a printed description of a burglary or other crime, suffering, gruesomeness and evil doing generally has not the same effect upon people as when they see the thing actually done before their very eyes. This is why newspapers use illustrations to make more vivid what they are attempting to describe.

Though located in New York as being the headquarters of the motion picture industry, the National Board does not accept as a basis of criticism the standards of the Metropolitan stage or of its highly colored life. It constantly seeks the point of view of the typical American and invites correspondence and suggestions from people in all parts of the country.



**16. Truth of Representation Is Not a Sufficient Criterion by which to Judge Pictures.**

Some people have said that any picture which is truthful, which depicts any aspect of life as it really is, should be passed; that only those pictures which do not ring true to life should be condemned.

This is a fallacy. There are phases of life in various parts of the world which would be entirely misunderstood by American audiences. Moreover, *complete* knowledge probably would hurt no one but the difficulty lies in this—that *complete* truth or knowledge is not given in a picture; we get only a partial vision of truth. Vice and crime often apparently triumph and lead most enjoyable existences, but it is impossible to define their influences upon any one life or to illustrate their ultimate consequences in the picture. The ramifications of evil are limitless. Consequently, it is impracticable to accept in film criticism the statement that if a picture be a true representation of life, it is harmless and should be passed.

**17. The Problem of Censoring Farces, Burlesques and Satire which Deal with Questions of Morality.**

The National Board has repeatedly stated that subjects which are immoral, indecent or innately criminal cannot be allowed on the excuse that their treatment is unusual and therefore disarming. This applies particu-

larly to farces and burlesques. There are certain types of subjects which become at once objectionable if treated in any but a serious manner. Many themes are made immoral when their true importance in the relations of society is ridiculed and shown in a farcical and burlesquing light. Marital infidelity, degeneracy and sexual irregularities are notable examples. In the drama of life these themes are generally ones of tragedy, the causes or results of social forces that mankind has always struggled against, and to make of them low comedy is not only to progress in the direction of bad taste but also to vulgarize the presentation of life itself. The Board will, therefore, act accordingly when such treatment is given these themes. So, likewise, satire should not be permitted to offend the moral sense in its attacks on existing customs, beliefs and manners. The National Board realizes, however, that satire has always been one of the chief forces in tearing away the conceits and hypocrisies of society in order that society may grow, and as such must be regarded as a legitimate and desirable form of expression in the new art of the motion picture drama.

**18. The Purpose of the Producer Versus the Effect Achieved.**

The Board is concerned with the effect achieved in a picture, the impression on the audience, rather than with the purpose which actuated the producer.

The producer's purpose obviously will not always produce the desired effect because of lack of skill or misunderstanding by the actors, and because the motion picture patron will always interpret and understand a picture in terms of his own experience and knowledge. He will not be a philosopher and analyze and rationalize the picture in terms of abstract principle, with a view to determining the producers' purpose.

Nevertheless, it will be well for the censors always to bear in mind what the producer intends. If by sub-titles or other means he has clearly indicated his purpose at the outset, the probability of his achieving the desired effect is greatly enhanced, as the audience is put into just the frame of mind that will most readily react as the producer requires. On



the other hand, the producer cannot attain his purpose by merely stating it in the beginning, if the picture itself belies his statement.

#### 19. Extraneous Incidents and Their Moral Effect.

Frequently it is of assistance in censoring pictures to consider whether a given incident is produced with the purpose of developing the characters of the drama or to amuse the audience. If the incident is simply as extraneous matter to the plot of the story and the development of the characters are open to slight criticism, but which have sufficient value in the play to make it obligatory upon the Board to pass them to avoid arbitrarily and irrationally limiting the possibilities of photoplay development. If, however, a questionable scene seems to be produced simply to amuse or thrill an audience, it must be unobjectionable from the censorship point of view. Otherwise, it has no legitimate excuse for being and will be eliminated. Cases like this call for a nice use of judgment and frequently opinions will differ.

#### 20. Pictures Must Be Judged as a Whole.

Pictures have to be judged as a whole with a view to the final total effect they will have upon the audiences, and the censor should remember that pictures should not be condemned because of some little incident in them. An incident which is objectionable *per se* is used, sometimes, in such a manner in the picture that it becomes merely tributary to the principal idea which may be good. The Board does not approve of a picture which lauds an evil deed as a commendable incident in bringing about a good one. On the other hand, it occasionally passes pictures where an evil incident is instrumental in bringing about a good, provided such evil incident is not held up as being excusable or commendable. This means that the incident must be purely incidental and not one of the features of the story to be remembered, to excite or to be emulated.

#### 21. How Far the National Board is Responsible for Truth in the Pictures.

The National Board holds itself in no wise responsible for the truth or falsity of the pictures or the incidents in them. This statement, however, should be modified somewhat. The Board has ruled that it will not pass pictures which would tend to influence public opinion on questions of fact in any matter that is before the courts for adjudication. The real ground for condemning the pictures of this type, is, of course, not that they are true or false, but rather that they would tend to distort the process of law. In general, however, the Board totally disregards the truth or falsity of pictures.

#### 22. Sectional, National and Class Prejudices and the Censorship.

Many of the criticisms of motion pictures and their censorship have their foundation in local prejudice. Practically uniform though the people of the United States are in most of their ideas, political, social and moral, there are yet certain striking differences and these differences naturally are much in evidence in the comments on motion pictures. It is clear that when the treatment of a race is unduly libelous, the question of censorship is raised. Now all these prejudices and different points



of view make it inexpedient to pass upon pictures in a purely rational manner according to certain principles theoretically conceived. Through the force of circumstances the Board is compelled to steer a middle course in an effort to adhere as closely as possible to the rationally conceived principles for which it stands, and yet pay sufficient regard to popular prejudice. By so interpreting its duty between the new art and public opinion it hopes to cause public opinion to be impressed upon the film art, while at the same time the film art is interpreted in such a manner as to change public opinion.

THE CENSOR WHO COMES TO THE BOARD, HOWEVER, WITH CERTAIN PRE-CONCEIVED PREJUDICES, CERTAIN POINTS OF VIEW BECAUSE OF HIS ENVIRONMENT AND PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE, SHOULD CONSTANTLY BE ON HIS GUARD AGAINST ALLOWING SUCH PERSONAL, SECTIONAL, CLASS OR PROFESSIONAL PREJUDICES UNDULY TO INFLUENCE HIS CENSORSHIP DECISIONS.

**23. The Exploitation of Notorious Characters.** The Board does not, in judging films, allow itself to be influenced by the moral character of persons who may be concerned in the production or acting in the films. But the Board does retain the right to forbid the exploitation of unworthy reputations, such as the morbid representation of persons who may have been associated with famous criminal cases. If the picture is merely a news picture without dramatic plot, however, it should be passed even though the person exploited has gained an evil notoriety. Occasionally a "fake" news picture or dramatic picture, founded upon a current event, is made. In judging the merits of such a picture, it is well to consider that its effect upon the public will be different from what would be the case were the same drama entirely divorced from the event upon which it may be founded. This is because it comes at a time when the public mind is in a condition where certain deeds, characters, or experiences have an unusual significance. Such a picture will often cast a glamour around the person or persons involved. Thereby, it becomes objectionable in setting up for emulation a person of unworthy character. In no case would the National Board pass a picture which glorified or excused the evildoer, or otherwise affected public opinion on a matter before the courts for adjudication.

From experience, the Board holds that it must take into consideration also the methods used in advertising and exploiting the characters of this type of photo play.

**24. Insanity in Motion Pictures.** Occasionally a photo-drama requires the presentation of an insane character. The danger in productions of this type is that the portrayal will be unduly morbid or gruesome. Consequently, the National Board has dealt severely with those films which picture maniacs on the ground that they unduly harass the emotions of the normal person and seldom serve a real dramatic purpose. The introduction of such characters is usually for the purpose of picturing a sensational and harrowing scene. The Board has to distinguish between dramatic purpose and the morbid, harrowing or gruesome. The insane character who is not a maniac is less liable to be eliminated from a picture; though if the presentation of such character be unduly unwholesome or unpleasant, it is chal-



This does not mean the elimination of all the minor things which run counter to the religious prejudices of a portion of the people, but only those things which actually tend to weaken the religious spirit or profane sacred things or bring them into contempt or disrepute. It is not in itself sufficient ground for condemning an incident that it is not true; to condemn it, it must be shown that it will have an injurious effect upon the audience.

**28. Bar Rooms, Drinking and Drunkenness.**

One of the perplexing problems in censorship is what to do with the bar-room scenes, drinking and drunkenness in motion pictures. They have a legitimate place in the motion picture drama, but the objection lies in the proportion they bear to all other scenes. Obviously this cannot be remedied rationally by enforcing censorship restrictions against some of them, though it can be influenced no doubt by helpful suggestions given in a co-operative spirit. This is done from time to time by the Board. The proportion of these scenes should be regulated in the final analysis by what the public shows it likes or dislikes. Certain types of drama require such scenes to give them realism and local color and to these in moderation the National Board can rationally take no exception. Such scenes must be used with discretion and made of significance in the drama. Scenes of this type are discouraged by the National Board, and, if it need be, condemned.

Occasionally producers essay to use drunkenness as a source of amusement, especially as farce or burlesque. The Board will condemn this if it afford occasion for nastiness or indecency. If, however, the farce and ridiculousness of the situation so far outshadow the intoxication that the latter is *overlooked*, pictures are sometimes passed even though intoxication is the basis of the amusement. Few producers and actors can handle the subject inoffensively and the tendency of the Board is more and more to eliminate such scenes, frequently condemning entire pictures of this type.

**29. Vulgarities in Pictures.**

The Board makes a constructive report to the producers each week on all films, and these comments, of course, give the attitude of the Board on questions of vulgarity in specific pictures. These reports, together with the occasional bulletins issued by the Board to the producers, are gradually correcting this offense against good sense and decency. Vulgarity is not wit. Vulgarity which is divorced from immorality is not a legitimate subject for censorship other than that of the slow working of public opinion; and unless the vulgarity borders on immorality or indecency, the National Board feels compelled to ignore it. The same is true of inanity also.

**30. Prolonged Passionate Love Scenes.**

One of the reforms established by the National Board has been the curtailment of those prolonged love scenes which are ardent beyond the strict requirements of the dramatic situation. The Board recognizes the difference between expressions of affection and sensuality and would discuss the motives for the introduction of scenes of this latter type. If these experiences are wholesome, truthful and artistic, there is no objection to their being shown provided the net effect is not salacious. The National Board believes it is one of the purposes of censorship to keep out of the mire the great experiences of humanity so that they may not be cheapened to the extent of their losing their significance.



### 31. Costuming—Tights and Insufficient Clothing.

Questions of immorality and indecency arise in connection with nudes and unusual costuming because of the accompanying action together with the associated ideas aroused in the minds of the spectators. Savages in their native dress and surroundings and pursuing their normal functions would be suggestive to nobody, but would be suggestive if these conditions were not true, or if the savages were performing some suggestive dance. It is impossible to pass pictures of women almost wholly dressed, but yet displaying a lavish amount of lingerie. The same thing is true of women's dress where it is too much décolleté. In both these cases, convention is disregarded and through the habit of association becomes unavoidably suggestive of indecency or immorality, as is illustrated by wearing a bathing costume away from a bathing beach.

To the adolescent youth and adult of arrested development, the mere fact that the costuming of a woman displays portions of her body usually concealed awakens the imagination and becomes suggestive of immorality and indecency. Especially is this true if the surroundings in which the scantily dressed characters are placed are unusually suggestive. The producers sometimes assume that true art calls for the particular costume chosen, but if the Board thinks that the art is put in to carry the immorality over, or that the immorality is more effective than the art, it considers that it is its duty to condemn the picture.

### 32. Infidelity and Sex Problem Plays.

The National Board has never denied that these are legitimate subjects for the motion picture, but has insisted that they be treated with seriousness and artistic reserve. In criticising this type of photo-play, the Board will insist that the recognized standards of sex morality be upheld.

### 33. Women Smoking and Drinking.

There are certain acts which are sometimes a question of custom, sometimes of taste and sometimes of morals. One example of this is the question of women's smoking and drinking. To the women of certain nationalities and places, it is a matter of custom altogether, and the pictures would be untrue without it; to women of other places, it is a matter of taste; that is, it is no longer a question of morals with them and yet is not crystallized into custom; and to the women of yet other places, it is esteemed a matter of morals. In judging such scenes, the National Board bases its action on the above theory.

### 34. Underworld Scenes:—Opium Joints, Gambling, Dance Halls and Objectionable Dancing, Vulgar Flirtations, Questionable Resorts.

The National Board requires that when scenes of the general type listed above are produced, it be in such a manner that no spectator is stimulated to put them in practice. For this reason, permanent profit or enjoyment should not be shown as accompanying characters in these scenes; rather their true characters as being innately low, vulgar and indecent should be brought out together with the inevitable results to which they lead. Their sordid nature must be kept in the minds of the spectators, and the scenes themselves must have dramatic usefulness in the play and not be introduced as so much



padding or vaudeville entertainment. The public does not approve of debauches and the Board will not tolerate a vicarious participation in them. The Board requires that when the portrayal of scenes of this type is necessary to the development of a legitimate story, it be truthful and complete so that no false notion of glamour, gaiety or romantic adventure lead any one to misapprehend the true character of such scenes, but rather show the essential sordidness, shallowness, discontent and commercialism on which these scenes and the characters in them rest. If produced with a proper purpose, these scenes are usually moral in effect, but if produced merely for entertainment, they are usually immoral and should be eliminated. There is danger of the number of such scenes being multiplied until the net impression of the drama is bad and the picture will be condemned.

As a rule, it is preferable to have such scenes short, both for the sake of morality and because the art is often greatest when unessential detail is suppressed to bring out the main impression. In gambling scenes, for instance, what is sought is the atmosphere of the place, development of the characters and certain salient facts such as who is the winner, while elaborate or instructive details of the gambling method used will be eliminated.

In dance hall scenes where various kinds of dancing are taking place, it is well to make the scene sketchy and avoid suggestively instructive details. To prolong such scenes beyond the needs of clear exposition is to invite elimination. The Board is consistently opposed to those dances where the positions of the dancers, their movements, etc., are evidently sensuous.

In questionable resort scenes, the purpose of the producer and the effect attained must guide the censor. If it is essential to the story and the story itself be permissible, it would seem that such scenes should be permitted; but they must be handled with the very greatest of care and only enough shown to make the exposition of the story clear and give the proper atmosphere. Without these scenes a comprehensive study of character development, which is one of the legitimate functions of the motion picture, would be impossible in some of the more pretentious plays. This matter, however, is so difficult to handle that it most often results in failure and consequently has to be eliminated. In principle, however, such scenes under certain conditions are permissible, but it is a subject that the Board cautions all producers against attempting. Of course, such scenes have to be made intellectually suggestive without being made physically stimulating and suggestive. The Board requires that when these scenes are produced they be made unintelligible to children and innocuous to adolescents.

**35. The Action of the General  
Committee of the National  
Board of Censorship on Films  
Dealing with the Social Evil.**

The members of the Board recognize that moving picture houses and the vaudeville theatres are primarily places of amusement and not of serious discussion and education. They agree that the only justification for the portrayal of the Social Evil by motion pictures is that they shall be educational. They further appreciate that the motion picture by reason of the lack of dialogue and the necessity of emphasis on the dramatic is a difficult medium for this form of education.



They agree, moreover, that education in the normal and abnormal facts of sex is fraught with danger and must be handled with tact and delicacy and given under the right surroundings to be effective.

These considerations have led them to agree as follows:

The Board will critically examine all films presenting various forms of sex lapses, for those effects on audiences which arouse rather than minimize passion, which tend to perpetuate the Double Standard of Morality, which reveal easy ways of gratifying desire and of making money in the "trade" or which simply indicate the weakness of humanity or recite the dreary detail of the lives of those unfortunate members of society called "prostitutes."

Since those who have worked most widely and skilfully on this problem have come to the conclusion that the most fruitful line of procedure in the region of prevention, the Board will give its support to those subjects and films which present facts in a sincere, dramatic way leading to repression or to the removal of causes of commercial or sub-rosa prostitution.

There is a place on the screen of the motion picture theatre for representations which unquestionably indicate the causes, the dangers and the effects of sexual misconduct. Those subjects dealing with the Social Evil will therefore be supported by the National Board of Censorship which arouse fear in the minds of both sexes, which develop a hatred on the part of the audience of this ancient evil, which stimulate efforts to rescue the prostitute, and which indicate sensible and workable methods of repression or suppression.

The Board further states that in every instance the psychological and moral effects of the motion picture on the audience must be studied. It is difficult to indicate in advance what these will be, since so much depends on the personality, sincerity and actions both of the players and the producers.

**36. Deeds of Violence.** In the absence of dialogue, the motion picture drama necessarily emphasizes action and movement, including deeds of violence. The spirit of struggle at the present stage of human development is a phase of growth, both spiritual and physical, necessary to continue and advance the race, and it would be unwise to deprecate this spirit which is so native and essential to man. While representative individuals may view with aversion the actual encounter of two men in a life and death struggle, yet the Board feels that violence *per se* has no inherent force for evil, and that if the struggle is fair and does not degenerate into excessive brutality and wanton cruelty, or show shocking detail, it should not be condemned. Nor has the Board felt that it could insist that the struggle be robbed of elements of treachery and trickery, nor dictate who shall win, nor what the weapons shall be, nor even who the principals shall be—though it will not tolerate the rough handling of women and children except where the life depicted is undoubtedly pioneer.

**37. The Senseless Use of Weapons.** Nothing in motion pictures appears more foolish than the constant picturing of weapons such as guns, revolvers, knives, clubs, etc. Unless the action depicted, in addition to being senseless, is also immoral or criminal, the Board holds that the matter should not be handled through censorship, but rather through the gradual protest of public



opinion. When, however, "frontier justice" brings about results contrary to those which would be secured through the regular agents of the law, the National Board finds that almost always it must eliminate the action. Under normal conditions, it will not pass pictures which show the successful balking of the law. Some latitude should be shown perhaps to pictures of the "wild and woolly" variety where next to impossible deeds are pictured. The conditions are such that the motion picture patron would find it impossible to duplicate them, and the whole action takes places in an atmosphere of rough romance. In pictures portraying new and disorganized communities, it sometimes happens that the logical effect (that it is at times laudable to contravene the law) is lost, and the total effect of a picture—namely, that the forces of good triumph over the forces of evil—warrants the Board in passing it.

**38. Treatment of Officers of the Law and Respect for the Law.**

The National Board urges that respect be shown for the law in action and in thought. Pictures involving the law and officers of the law require careful handling. There is a certain value in showing the miscarriage of justice, but this needs to be handled with discretion, and the work should be approached in a spirit of greater seriousness than simply that of amusement or entertainment. At the present rapid rate at which films are produced, this is a difficult thing to accomplish and the Board warns producers against attempting it. If, however, a real moral lesson is taught by the play, the Board feels that it should pass it.

**39. Advisability of Punishment Following Crime.**

One of the things which should be avoided is the throwing of an atmosphere of romantic adventure around a criminal, especially if the time and place pictured suggest to the impressionable young people who see the picture the possibility of reproducing the same or similar action.

It is well to show that evil doing brings its own reward, and it is usually desirable to have the catastrophe follow necessarily, logically and in a convincing manner and not merely have the catastrophe accidental or providential. Of course, if the action is convincing, it is permissible to have retribution as an act of Divine Will or Providence but it frequently happens that the production is so crude that the Avenging Providence loses all its significance. Truth and sincerity are *sine qua non* in such cases. As a general rule, it is preferable to have retribution come through the hands of the authorized officers of the law, rather than through revenge, or other unlawful or extra-legal means. The taking of the law into one's own hands is a vicious suggestion. Unwritten law and frontier justice can only be frowned on by the law-respecting and dramatically capable actor and producer, and the National Board is opposed to such presentation, except as stated in section 37.

**40. The Board's Attitude Toward Crime.**

The National Board has no objection to some specific crimes, for it realizes that it should not attempt to eliminate the portrayal of all evil from motion pictures. Serious drama, as distinguished from comedy, farce, and burlesque almost always depicts a struggle between the forces of good on the one hand and the forces of evil on the other, and to eliminate either one of these elements



would be very largely to eliminate the drama itself. Usually the forces of evil are represented by a villain who commits crime and seeks his ends through violence. Accordingly the question for the National Board is not whether it will permit the committal of crime in pictures, but rather what are the motives and results of the crimes, and the manner in which they are performed. The Board objects to the display of crime being suggestive, instructive and gruesome; and it insists upon a sane balancing of the picture as a whole so that the final effect of the picture will be good or, at worst, harmless. The portrayal of crime should not degenerate into pandering to a morbid appetite, but should seek ends which are legitimate for the drama. The extended exposition of crimes which involve tricks, skill or unusual ingenuity is not permitted.

#### 41. The Motives and the Results of Crime as Shown in Motion Pictures.

Every film presents special problems, but in the case of films depicting crime two of there are certain truths concerning all and the principal points to be borne in mind by the censor are the motives and the results of the crime or crimes depicted. An adequate motive for committing a crime is always necessary to warrant picturing it. The Board will insist on punishment of the criminal when his crime might be considered by the young and impressionable spectator as an excusable act. In other cases, it is desirable that the criminal be punished in some way, but the Board does not always insist upon this. Careful discrimination must be made between the merits of the motive and the suggestions lurking in it as an excuse for the crime; for, under no conditions will the Board pass a picture where apparent approval is given of any cause for crime. The results of the crime should be in the long run disastrous to the criminal so that the impression carried is that crime will inevitably find one out, soon or late, and bring on a catastrophe which causes the temporary gain from the crime to sink into insignificance. The result should spring logically and convincingly from the crime, and the results should take a reasonable proportion of the film. The motives, incidents, and results are always considered in censoring these pictures.

#### 42. Crimes of Violence Against Property and Persons.

Crimes of violence may be roughly divided into crimes against property and those against persons. Possibly theft, fraud, forgery, burglary and robbery may be considered under the first head by a slight stretching of the use of the term. In these cases, the point to be guarded against is that no suggestively instructive and ingenious method be exploited, such as ways in which safes can be opened, checks raised, signatures forged, etc. These matters can be adequately presented by suggestion or by such distant views that it is impossible to know just what is being done. This is often accomplished, also, by having the scene take place in the dark, or with the operation obstructed from the view of the audience by the person of one of the actors.

Especially dangerous is the presentation of any attempt at train wrecking, and this is one of the crimes which is always eliminated by the National Board. This includes tampering with railroad apparatus.



Arson is a difficult crime to present in photo-plays in such a manner that the suggestion be not a menace to the public; all details of this crime are eliminated by the Board as being suggestive and instructive. In general, the Board will rule against films in which a clearly defined pyromaniac is shown at work. Excessive preparations and the actual application of the torch are not permitted in films depicting arson taking place in present-day modern surroundings. Exceptions are sometimes made in pictures dealing with disorganized communities. The Board has consistently ruled against arsons which are used to cover up crime, or in which human beings are burned. The National Board never permits picturing arson as a laudable deed under any circumstances, nor rarely as an act of vengeance. The tendency of the Board is to eliminate it entirely, producers being constantly warned against its employment.

Crimes of violence against persons present practically the same problems, but in addition the question of gruesomeness enters and makes the work of censoring somewhat more difficult. Especially will the Board condemn a picture in which the violence is that of a maniac; and indeed it will condemn any film in which a maniac is a leading character and his adventures furnish the essentials of the drama. The motion picture visualizes violence for us and presents problems which the newspaper does not have to encounter. Therefore the National Board feels warranted in suppressing detail that the press is at liberty to employ. For example, the printed word may describe an assault and murder to us with considerable thoroughness without being unduly gruesome, whereas, if the same thing were done in the motion picture, it would excite horror and disgust, and unnerve the sensitive. The actual deeds of violence need to be treated with the greatest discretion in motion pictures, and the producer should remember that he is not writing a detailed exposition of a crime, but is telling a dramatic story which most often does not need such detail, but merely enough to make clear what has happened. Thus in torture scenes, it is sufficient to show that torture is going to be or has been inflicted, and it is unnecessary and objectionable to show just what the torture machine is doing, or the bodies of the victims writhing in agony.

The crime of suicide is one that is so suggestive to certain people that it needs most careful treatment by the producer, who would do well to avoid it altogether. The deed is so irreparable that even the slightest thing which can be construed as a justification of it and an incentive to it must be avoided. The Board may, however, consistently pass dramatic suicides—that is, suicides which are virtually necessary to the logical development of the drama, and not a means of getting rid of a character. The producer, however, who employs suicide as being the easiest method for him to get rid of a character to preserve the continuity of his drama should seek other means and use greater ingenuity to solve his problem, as such suicides are condemned. Even in case a character probably deserves some sort of self-punishment, the Board feels that the crime of self-destruction is such a terrible one and so full of suggestions that the introduction of it into motion pictures could be justified only in extreme cases as in a classic, a romance of another age, historic drama, or where, being unsuggestive, it is more or less of an incident to another theme. The whole tendency of the Board is to eliminate suicides.



**Murder.** The question of murder, including assassinations, executions, gang murders, and murders by individuals, presents few new problems to the censor and, such as these are, he can solve by recourse to general principles already stated. Common sense dictates that picturing the assassination of any person who might be taken for some public character should be forbidden. Practically all execution scenes should be merely suggested and not given because of their gruesomeness. In murder, the thing to be avoided is again suggestiveness, instruction and gruesomeness. No one cares to see repeated stabbings or a body that has been mangled and such portrayals are always eliminated. Near or prolonged views of murders are objectionable as are also pictures of labels of poisons used in murders or suicides. Indeed, the use of poisons, knock-out drops, chloroform, sleeping potions, etc., is constantly challenged by the Board. Just enough of murder scenes to make the exposition clear is permitted; all else is liable to be either suggestive, instructive or gruesome and consequently to be eliminated or condemned. The producer who handles these subjects must needs employ caution, while keeping his story clear, to remain within the standards of the National Board of Censorship.

#### 43. The Insignia of The National Board.



The insignia of the National Board has been adopted as the official stamp of the films passed. It is copyrighted and registered in the U. S. Patent Office. Its unauthorized use is an infringement of the copyright law and will be prosecuted as such.

It should be borne in mind that the absence of this design on certain pictures does not indicate that such pictures have not been reviewed by the National Board, for films are used repeatedly and their constant exhibition results in tearing off sections of the pictures at the end so that the design soon disappears from old pictures. Again, in many theatres, the operators do not run the films completely through their projection machines and while the design may appear on the film it does not show on the screen.

All producing companies are giving increased care to putting the insignia on their films. There is a constantly growing demand for this "guarantee" on the part of both public and exhibitors.

The National Board passes upon all pictures produced by the leading American film producers and the product of foreign filmmakers regularly represented in America. Careful investigation shows that at least 95 per cent. of the pictures produced are reviewed by the National Board. The attention of the Board's correspondents is directed to uncensored pictures which are listed on the official bulletin of the Board as they may come to our notice from time to time. Such pictures can well command the attention of local officials or committees.

#### 44. The Future of Censorship.

The Board's standards are, of course, progressive and will change with the lapse of time; but they will develop along the lines above indicated, becoming more ideal as the motion picture art emerges in America from its present condition as a new art. Moreover, the increased experience of the producers, the development of motion picture artists, the classification of the theatres, the influence of more cultured audiences and the popular adoption of motion pictures into education, all of which are even now in process, will in time bring about conditions so different from the present that censorship may perhaps not be necessary.



